



Beyond Development

GTI Roundtable

February 2018



The indigenous concept of Vivir Bien offers a cosmovision of living in harmony with nature and one another. However, recently, the term has been coopted by governments wedded to conventional development. Pablo Solón explains the foundations and potential of this alternative to development, and our panel explores how Vivir Bien and kindred movements can shape our visions and strategy.

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Vivir Bien: Old Cosmovisions and New Paradigms

Pablo Solón

Abstract: The concept of Vivir Bien (or Buen Vivir) gained international attention in the late twentieth century as people searched for alternatives to the rampage of neoliberalism. Imperfect translations of the Andean concepts of *suma qamaña* and *sumaq kawsay*, Vivir Bien and Buen Vivir reflect an indigenous cosmovision that emphasizes living in harmony with nature and one another. As these ideas' popularity has grown, however, their meaning has been compromised. Governments in Bolivia and Ecuador incorporated Vivir Bien and Buen Vivir, respectively, into their constitutions and governing agendas on paper, but not in spirit. Rather than radical alternatives to the dominant paradigm of development and progress, these concepts have become new branding for (un)sustainable development. The lessons are clear: to avoid state cooptation, truly revolutionary change must be based on emancipation and self-determination from below. And to succeed in our interdependent world, proponents of Vivir Bien must link up with advocates of complementary global movements on the path of a better future for all.

Vivir Bien stands as a powerful yet contested framework for reconceptualizing the good society.

Andean Renaissance

Three decades ago, few South Americans spoke of Vivir Bien (hereafter VB). They may have heard of *suma qamaña* and *sumaq kawsay*, concepts rooted in the systems of knowledge, practice, and organization of the native peoples of the Andes.¹ VB is an incomplete and insufficient translation of this ethos, which has a more complex set of meanings, such as “plentiful life,” “sweet life,” “harmonious life,” “sublime life,” “inclusive life,” or “to know how to live.”

The formulation and embrace of VB emerged in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. This might not have happened without the devastating impact of neoliberalism and the Washington Consensus. The relentless privatization and commodification of nature, along with the failure of Soviet socialism and lack of alternative paradigms, inspired a return to indigenous visions and practices.

The new concept of VB had not fully matured when the arrival of the governments of Evo Morales in Bolivia (2006) and Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2007) began a new phase. Vivir Bien, and the equivalent term Buen Vivir in Ecuador, were written into the new constitutions of each country, thereby becoming the basis for various normative and institutional reforms. The terms became central to the official discourse, and were incorporated into the national development plans of both countries.

The constitutional triumph of VB contributed to a growing interest in related alternative visions like Thomas Berry’s “Earth Jurisprudence.” VB also stimulated new ideas such as the rights of Mother Earth and the rights of nature not acknowledged originally in VB. At the same time, scholars and activists advancing other systemic perspectives, including degrowth, the commons, and ecosocialism, began finding a source of inspiration in VB.

However, high hopes soon gave way to profound disputes, especially over implementation. Is the essence of VB really being applied? Are we moving toward this goal, or have we lost our way? VB stands as a powerful yet contested framework for reconceptualizing the good society. To clarify its promise and its limits, this essay explores three areas: first, the cultural vision and practices that inspired and underlay VB; second, a critique of its implementation thus far; and third, its potential contribution to the broader challenge of nurturing the systemic alternatives urgently needed.

Core Elements

There is no decalogue of VB; rather, it is a broad, evolving framework. Any attempt to define it in absolute terms would thus stifle its dynamism. Still, we can locate various interpretations within an overarching cosmovision.

The point of departure of any systemic alternative is its comprehension of the whole. For VB, the whole is the *Pacha*. This Andean concept has often been translated simply as Earth (hence we speak of *Pachamama* as Mother Earth). However, its meaning is much broader and deeper, including the indissoluble unity of space and time. *Pacha* is the whole in constant movement; it is the cosmos in a permanent state of becoming.

In this cosmovision, past, present, and future coexist and interrelate dynamically, reminiscent of Einstein's well-known comment: "The distinction between the past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion." VB understands time and space as cyclical rather than linear, a vision incompatible with mainstream notions of growth and progress. Time moves as a spiral; with any advance, comes a return, and any return brings an advance. This vision questions the very essence of the notion of "development," of always advancing toward a higher point, always searching to do better. Such ascendant becoming is a fiction for VB, in which motion involves turns and change, and re-encounters of past, present, and future.

VB is Pachacentric, rather than anthropocentric. In the *Pacha*, there is no dichotomy between living beings and inert bodies—all have life, and all life is understood as the relation between all parts of the whole. In particular, there is no separation between human beings and nature. All are part of nature, and the *Pacha* as an entirety has life.

Coexisting in Multipolarity

The VB vision apprehends duality everywhere, since everything comes in contradictory pairs. Pure good or bad does not exist; good and bad always coexist. Everything is and is not. The individual and the community are two poles of the same unit. Without community, there is no individual, and without singular beings, there is no community.

This bipolarity—indeed, multipolarity—of partners is universal, with the individual-community polarity immersed in the humanity-nature polarity. Thus, the community becomes a community of both humans and non-humans. To pursue VB is to learn to live together in this complex interplay of being. The challenge is not "to be" but "to learn to interrelate" with the other contradictory parts of the whole. Existence becomes not a static state but a relational concept of becoming.

In the Andean communities, individual private property and communal property coexist. Naturally, differences and tensions surface between members of a community. To manage those tensions, various cultural practices promote some kind of redistributive resolution. For example, the wealthiest may pay for the fiesta of the entire community or other acts or services that benefit everyone. The worst punishment is to be expelled from the community because then you lose your membership, your essence, your identity.

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Understanding the whole in its multiple components contributes to the quest for harmonious coexistence.

VB is not egalitarian; perfect equality is an illusion because inequalities and differences always exist. The key is to coexist with them, to prevent inequalities and differences from becoming so acute and polarizing that they destabilize the whole. The fundamental call is to learn, or relearn, to live in community, respecting the multipolarity that is the whole.

Dynamic Equilibrium

VB seeks equilibrium among the various elements that make up the whole—a harmony among human beings and also between humanity and nature, between the material and the spiritual, between knowledge and wisdom, between diverse cultures, and between different identities and realities. This is not merely a version of development that is less anthropocentric and more democratic, holistic, or humanizing, for VB does not embrace the conventional Western equation of development with progress and permanent growth.

In a related vein, the equilibrium pursued by VB is itself not permanent. Any apparent equilibrium of a given moment will generate contradictions and disparities that call for new actions to find a new balance. That is the principal source of cyclical movement through space-time. The pursuit of harmony between human beings and with Mother Earth is not the search for an idyllic state but the ongoing *raison d'être* of the whole.

Equilibrium is always dynamic. Only by understanding the whole in its multiple components and in its becoming can we contribute to the search for a new equilibrium, the quest for harmonious coexistence. The role of humans is to act as a bridge, an intermediary within the whole connecting elements seeking equilibrium with nature, cultivating with wisdom what nature has given us. In this view, human beings are not “producers,” “conquerors,” or “transformers” of nature, but “caretakers,” “cultivators,” and “mediators.”

Complementarity

In complementarity lies the key to achieving equilibrium by balancing the opposites that together comprise a whole. The aim is not to cancel the other, but to augment each other in a new synthesis, seeking ways to complement and complete the totality of the different parts, even those that are antagonistic. Differences and particularities are part of nature and life. We shall never all be the same and equal. What we must do is respect diversity and find ways to articulate experience, share knowledge, and understand ecosystems.

From the perspective of complementarity, competition is negative because some win and others lose, unbalancing the totality. Complementarity seeks to optimize by combining strengths with the conviction that the more we work together, the

Decolonization is a long-term historical process, not a single occurrence.

greater the resilience of each and all. Complementarity, rather than implying neutrality between opposites, recognizes the possibilities diversity provides for balancing and integrating the contradictions of the whole.

Thus, VB is the encounter of diversity. “Knowing how to live” is to practice pluriculturalism that strives to recognize and learn from difference without arrogance or prejudice. Accepting diversity means that there are other valid Buen Vivires in addition to the Andean version. Those Buen Vivires survive in the wisdom, knowledge, and practices of peoples pursuing their own identities. Rather than a utopian regression to an idealized past, these perspectives look forward, knowing that throughout history there have been, there are, and there will be many forms of cultural, economic, and social organization that, to the extent they complement one another, can help overcome the systemic crisis humanity now faces.

Decolonization

VB envisions a continual struggle for decolonization. The Spanish conquest 500 years ago initiated a new cycle that did not end with the independence of the republics in the nineteenth century. Rather, that cycle continues under post-colonial forms and structures of domination.

The process of decolonizing entails change beyond formal autonomy to dismantling inherited political, economic, social, cultural, and mental systems that continue to rule us. Decolonization is a long-term historical process, not a single occurrence. We can achieve independence from a foreign power and still be economically dependent on it. We can secure a certain economic sovereignty, yet still be culturally subjugated. We can fully acknowledge our cultural identity in a new constitution, yet remain prisoners of Western consumerist values.

This is perhaps the most difficult part of the decolonization process: liberating our minds and souls, which have been captured by false and alien concepts. Building VB means decolonizing both our territories and our being. The decolonization of territory means self-management and self-determination at all levels. Decolonization of being is even more complex and includes overcoming many modes, beliefs, and values that impede our re-engagement with the *Pacha*. The first step is to see with our own eyes, think our own thoughts, and dream our own dreams. This journey begins by encountering our roots, our identity, our history, and our dignity. To decolonize is to reclaim our life, to recover the horizon.

Cooptation

Institutionalizing and formalizing a cosmovision inevitably leads to its dismemberment. Some aspects will be featured, others left aside. Some meanings will stand while others are lost. In the end, a mutilated corpus remains that may reach a wider audience but in incomplete form.

Bolivia's Law on the Rights of Mother Earth exists only on paper.

Such a distortion happened to VB under the governments of Evo Morales and Rafael Correa. For the first time, after centuries of exclusion, indigenous peoples' vision was recognized and incorporated as a core element in the political agendas of both countries. Vivir Bien and Buen Vivir were included, in different wording, in the new constitutions of Bolivia (2008) and Ecuador (2009), respectively. The Ecuadorian version emphasizes a vision of rights whereas the Bolivian version stresses an ethical-moral concept.

Although their incorporation was a noteworthy achievement, Buen Vivir and Vivir Bien coexisted uneasily with the dominant developmentalist and productivist vision. Not surprisingly, along the way, Vivir Bien and Buen Vivir lost much substance. Focusing on Bolivia in this discussion, we can say that rather than transforming society along the lines of VB, the government has pursued a populist extractivist model, relying heavily on the drawdown of nonrenewable natural resources, under conditions of increasing authoritarianism.

By standard economic metrics, Bolivia's story is one of success: GDP has grown, extreme poverty has been reduced, and public investment has increased. Such investment, along with new social programs and conditional cash transfers, has reduced income inequality. Quality of life has improved for various sectors of the population, which accounts for the popular support still enjoyed by the government.

Even so, Bolivia is not on the road to VB. The key measures of progress for that goal are not GDP, the Gini index, World Bank poverty indicators, or other such statistics. What matters most is whether urban and rural communities, social movements and social organizations, are getting stronger; becoming more self-organized, creative, and resilient; embracing greater solidarity; practicing complementarity; and contributing to the restoration of nature. On these criteria, Bolivia has lagged.

Bolivia's economic boom depended on extraction. Increased state control over natural gas resources, combined with a commodities boom benefiting Bolivian raw materials, led to an eightfold growth in revenue for the government from 2005 to 2013, enabling an increase in public investment and expansion of basic services.² Today, though, this model is in crisis: prices of hydrocarbons and raw materials have fallen, and the country faces plummeting exports and international reserves, along with ballooning foreign debt.³

Just as extractive industries have thrived, so, too, has agribusiness. Bolivia's 2010 Law on the Rights of Mother Earth, passed in 2010, which gives rights to—and protects the integrity of—nature, exists only on paper. GMOs have taken over soy production (from 21% of total exports in 2005 to 92% in 2012), with corn production following suit.⁴ National parks and protected areas are under threat by roads and mega-dams. Deforestation, once in decline, is on the rise, and the government is encouraging the expansion of agribusiness at the expense of forests.

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While flush with revenue, Bolivia was able to ignore the need for economic diversification. As a result, the present economy is even more dependent on primary resource extraction than in the boom years. The government's prospective plans through 2025 call for more exploitation of hydrocarbons, new mega-dams for electricity export, and the expansion of agribusiness with concomitant loss of forests. All of these strategies carry major environmental impacts and problematic economic implications.

The government has an opportunity to abjure the replication of this "old modernity" that lingers on from the twentieth century. Rather than continuing to focus on state corporations, it can, and should, follow a better model that incorporates the most recent technological advances within a communitarian and social perspective. For example, the future of energy lies in renewables, not fossil fuel extraction. The development of community, municipal, and residential solar and wind energy can transform Bolivians from mere consumers into producers of electricity, while shifting electricity generation to renewables from its current 70% reliance on natural gas. And the future of agriculture lies in agroecology, agroforestry, and the strengthening of food sovereignty based on the indigenous and peasant communities, not the expansion of agribusiness.

Last but not least, severe inequality will persist as long as countries adhere to extractivism. Such inequality cannot be overcome by conditional cash transfers alone. Redistribution cannot be limited to the reassignment of the fraction of revenue that is not appropriated by the economically powerful sectors. The search for equality cannot be reduced to welfare programs while big landlords, extractive enterprises, and banks continue to accumulate big profits.⁵ Structural inequities demand structural shifts in institutions, not just salves for the most egregious human impacts of a highly skewed society.

Beyond Statism and Extractivism

In Bolivia, a huge chasm has opened between discourse and reality, law and practice. The rights of Mother Earth during the last decade have never prevailed over the interests of extraction, pollution, and depredation of nature. Enforcing the rights of Mother Earth requires autonomous mechanisms and regulations to reduce and punish the constant violations against ecosystems, and above all to promote the restoration and recovery of previously degraded areas. The government, however, has shown no desire to limit its extractivist projects.

The fundamental role of the state should be to empower and help coordinate local networks of production, exchange, credit, traditional knowledge, and innovation. This contrasts sharply with Bolivia's predominant statist vision, as articulated by the vice president: "The State is the only actor that can unite society. It is the State that

The “statizing” of Vivir Bien undermined its power to foster self-management and challenge the status quo.

takes on the synthesis of the general will, plans the strategic framework and steers the front carriage of the economic locomotive.”⁶ Such a vision is antithetical to VB.

Although the hardcore neoliberal right has lost power, democracy remains thin, with the parliament routinely rubber-stamping presidential decisions. We need real democracy to advance the self-management, self-determination, and empowerment of communities and social organizations. A more popular and decentralized democracy, the only way to identify and correct mistakes made as we build a new eco-society, is thus essential to VB.

When the central government makes public participation a mere formal exercise, coopts social organizations, and tightly controls power, it cripples the development of such a real democracy. But it does not have to be this way. Rather than engaging in clientelism, the state can empower communities and social organizations. How? By encouraging them to analyze, debate, question, and develop public policies, and in many cases carry them out, without waiting for a green light from the state.

The concepts of *suma qamaña* and *sumak qawsay* survived for centuries in struggle against the Inca state, the colonial state, the republican state, and the neoliberal state. These were weighty communitarian visions and practices, albeit unrecognized by the established powers in each of those epochs. The “statizing” of VB undermined its power to foster self-management and challenge the status quo.

Often, the Marxist left’s goal is to take state power in order to change society from above. However, the Bolivian experience over the last decade demonstrates that for VB, the goal of taking power should be to encourage emancipation and self-determination from below, questioning and subverting the colonial structures that persist or arise even in the new “revolutionary” state. Any political movement that engages with power structures in order to transform society stands on shifting sands. Negative impacts and side effects, such as the temptations of privilege and corruption, pragmatic alliances and compromises, and the mirage of permanence in power are inevitable.

The best way to avoid being captured by the logic of power is to empower autonomous counter-powers, not as passive state clients, but as entities truly capable of counterbalancing the conservative and reactionary forces that remain, as well as those that develop within the new structures of power. Above all, the vitality of the transformation process depends on encouraging the idea and practice of the commons throughout society and between society and nature.

The goal is intertwining diverse approaches in the search for holistic answers.

Systematic Alternatives

The experience of the past decade demonstrates that it is not possible to enact VB in a single country. The interdependence of the global economy exerts significant pressure on countries to align with the predominant capitalist, productivist, extractivist, patriarchal, and anthropocentric paradigm. The future of Vivir Bien therefore depends on the recovery, reconstruction, and empowerment of other visions worldwide that point toward the same broad objectives. Our success is tied to the success of parallel “great transitions” in other places and at the global level, which requires interaction and complementarity with other systemic alternative perspectives.

In order to flourish, BV and parallel alternatives elsewhere must expand beyond the national borders of their origins into the countries that now colonize the planet in different ways. Without dissemination to the centers of global power, they risk isolating themselves and losing vitality, ultimately repudiating the very principles and values that once animated them.

Seeking complementarity among VB, ecosocialism, the commons, degrowth, ecofeminism, and other aligned approaches will enrich them all.⁷ Rather than developing a single vision, the goal is intertwining diverse approaches in the search for holistic answers. Ultimately, all visions and approaches for a Great Transition have strengths and weaknesses. VB, for example, does not adequately address the issues of patriarchy, capitalism, globalization, or state power. Its core elements like totality, complementarity, multipolarity, dynamic equilibrium, and decolonization are essential, but not enough by themselves to transform the current system.

Mutually reinforcing systems—capitalism, productivism, extractivism, plutocracy, patriarchy, and anthropocentrism—are deepening the crisis of the Earth community. Their logics operate at all levels, from politics to personal relationships, from institutions to ethics, from historic memory to visions of the future. To think that we can resolve one without dealing with the others would be a fatal mistake.

We cannot overcome capitalism if we do not address the productivism that is deeply rooted in the extractivism of nature and in the reproduction of the plutocratic and patriarchal structures of power. Equally, it is impossible to recover the balance of the Earth system without getting out of the logic of capital that commodifies everything, perversely finding new business opportunities in the crisis. This understanding is one of the key contributions of *ecosocialism*.

The contemporary systemic crisis endangers the multiple ecosystems that have made possible diverse lifeforms, including the human species. The climatic stability that has allowed the rise of settled agriculture and numerous civilizations is now at risk.

Overcoming capitalism requires a new vision of modernity.

Many forms of life will disappear—a sixth major extinction—if the balance of the atmosphere, oceans, soil, and solar radiation continues to be compromised.

This challenge cannot be met by exchanging a capitalism of large private owners for a state capitalism under the name of “socialism.” A century of experience has made clear that an ecological and emancipatory alternative to the free market cannot have all spheres of life under control by the state. Redistribution and sustainability, to be effective, have to involve actors outside the market and the state. This is the great contribution of the notion of the *commons*, with its stress not just on the common good, but on self-organized and self-managed commoners who create that good.

It is worth repeating that the logic of capital does not act alone. It is nurtured and undergirded by anthropocentrism, patriarchy, wealth concentration, plutocracy, and a consumerist culture that valorizes competition and individualism. The expropriation and socialization of capital by the state does not in itself alter the productivist and extractivist essence of capital—it can even reinforce and aggravate it. The logic of capital can continue to govern even when the state has nationalized large-scale enterprises.

Extractivism can never be sustainable, and humanity has no future unless we stop plundering nature. It is not enough to socialize enterprises without transforming them based on respect for the vital cycles of nature and social well-being. Since unlimited growth of productive forces on a finite planet is impossible, we must finally abandon the growth imperative of capitalism. *Degrowth* offers a way to envision a future without economic growth based on a more human and natural scale.

Overcoming capitalism requires a new vision of modernity. If the objective of “development” remains for all to live and consume like the upper middle class, we will never survive let alone supersede the logic of capital and unlimited growth. Satisfying basic needs without increasing consumerism will take a self-organized and self-managed society. Letting the state lead from above while those below simply follow breeds authoritarianism and societal tension. Of course, the state can and should regulate where appropriate, but only in support of a society that increasingly manages the sources of life in a frugal way. Ultimately, the key to social transformation lies with the capacity of commoners to build a different modernity with balance, moderation, and simplicity at its center.

A true global change will rest with change at the personal, family, and community levels. *Ecofeminism* illuminates the need for complementarity between change in the public and private spheres. A sustainable transformation must be anchored in revolutionizing human relations in the most intimate nuclei of peoples’ lives. But the dismantling of patriarchal structures is difficult because their reproduction

A sustainable transformation must be anchored in revolutionizing human relations.

is insidiously invisible in the family, the union, the community, the political party, the school, and the government.

Capitalism has exacerbated this dynamic, but did not create it: patriarchy infused almost all precapitalist societies. Hence, the overthrow of capitalism will not itself lead to the overthrow of patriarchy. The experiences of state capitalism show that patriarchal social arrangements and values can survive long after the nationalization or expropriation of private capital. And the original conception of Vivir Bien did not confront patriarchy, although its vision of equilibrium between humanity and nature requires doing so.

Like the system of world capitalism it challenges, the dynamic process of constructing alternatives is constantly evolving. Correspondingly, searching for complementarity and synergy among VB, ecosocialism, the commons, degrowth, ecofeminism, and other proposals yields multiple and diverse interactions. Although not easy, nurturing a bold, synergistic approach is the only way to overcome the mistakes of fragmentation and the forces of cooptation in advancing a Great Transition.

Endnotes

1. "Vivir Bien," the term commonly used in Bolivia, is referred to as "Buen Vivir" in Ecuador. Similar visions to *suma qamaña* and *sumaq kawsay* are found among other indigenous people of Latin America, such as *Teko Kavi* and *Nandereko* of the Guaraní, *Shiir Waras* of the Shuar, and *Küme Mongen* of the Mapuche.
2. Rather than nationalize foreign companies, Bolivia renegotiated the distribution of profits. The share of total profits for transnational companies declined from 43% in 2005 to only 22% in 2013. See Carlos Arce Vargas, *Una década de gobierno ¿Construyendo el Vivir Bien o el capitalismo salvaje?* (Amsterdam: Centre for Latin American Research and Documentation, 2016).
3. Bolivian total exports reached 13 billion USD in 2014 then fell to 7.2 billion USD in 2016. International reserves decreased from 15 billion USD in 2014 to 10 billion USD in 2017. Foreign debt increased from 2.7 billion USD in 2007 to 7.2 billion USD in 2016.
4. Manuel Morales Alvarez, "El gobierno de Evo Morales y los Transgénicos," *Patria Insurgente Sol Para Bolivia*, April 4, 2012, <http://patriainsurgente.nuevaradio.org/?p=466>.
5. Transnational and national oligarchies continue to benefit from the extractivist-populist model in Bolivia. The profits of the banking system rose from 80 million USD in 2006 to 283 million USD in 2014, while two transnational companies, Petrobras and Repsol, handle 75% of the natural gas production. The Minister of Finance encouraged investment in Bolivia by noting that the profits of private enterprises more than quadrupled from 2005 to 2013. See Marco Belmonte, "Arce estima que las empresas ganaron \$us 4.111 millones," *Página Siete*, November 22, 2013, <http://www.paginasiete.bo/economia/2013/11/22/arce-estima-empresas-ganaron-4111-millones-6662.html>.
6. Álvaro García Linera, "Fue un error no liderar el pedido autonómico," *El Deber*, January 21, 2007, cited in Eric Toussaint, "¿Un capitalismo andino-amazónico?" *Rebelión*, October 23, 2009, <http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=93828>.
7. I expand on this theme in my 2017 book *Systemic Alternatives*: <https://systemicalternatives.org/category/english/>.

About the Author



Pablo Solón, a Bolivian social and environmental activist, is the director of Fundación Solón and former executive director of Focus on the Global South. He joined the struggle against water privatization in Cochabamba (2000) and La Paz (2005), and coordinated the Bolivian movement against the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (2001–2005). He served as the Bolivian Extraordinary Ambassador for Integration and Trade (2006–2008) and Ambassador to the United Nations (2009–2011) before parting ways with President Evo Morales following police repression of an indigenous peoples march. His father was the well-known muralist Walter Solón Romero Gonzáles.



Roundtable



David Barkin

Solón's contribution to the Great Transition Initiative (GTI) offers an opportunity to continue discussing some of the pithier issues related to the nature of the GT being debated in the varied series of proposals for moving beyond the profound crises facing our societies. Perhaps one of the most difficult issues underlying the discussions is the nature of the transition envisioned by the authors of the discussion papers and the respondents. On several occasions, I have argued that the possibility of a (global) systemic change often considered as necessary by many participants is not realistic in this historical period; the national and/or global transformations proposed would require a profound reordering of institutions that are presently carefully protected by the palace guards of the ruling classes. Further complicating the process, broad segments of the population in most capitalist countries have been so thoroughly integrated into and are dependent on the prevailing model of domination and exploitation that they cannot possibly contemplate the kinds of radical change proposed by many of the discussion papers we are considering. They are so fearful of these changes that they are participating in promoting a broad move towards "populist" regimes in many parts of the capitalist—regimes that seek to narrow the opportunities available to the most underprivileged sectors in those societies.

The question that Solón has put on the table is the nature and scale of alternatives being considered. Although the VB proposal that he is discussing emerged into the international spotlight as a result of its inclusion in the constitutional reforms in Ecuador and Bolivia more than a decade ago, it has been part of a discussion of alternative paradigms for a much longer period. The inclusion of VB in the national political platforms of these two Andean countries almost magically changed the discussion from one of the applicability to social change of indigenous cosmologies to another about the nature of development strategies. This turn in the debate requires a deeper evaluation of the motives behind the players and the suitability of this quite amorphous doctrine to offer guidance on how to shape local, national, or global strategies for social change.

I would like to step back from this level of discussion to confront the indigenous cosmologies in their own territories and their own societies. VB is only one of a myriad of such paradigms that societies around the world have incorporated into belief systems to guide their social, political, and economic institutions; their interaction with their environments; and their relationships with the societies of which they are a part. Our belated realization of the larger numbers and extraordinary variety of such systems is evidence of our deep rootedness in the capitalist system and the Eurocentric roots of our intellectual and political traditions and knowledge systems. Today, for example, it seems quite extraordinary that only recently have we begun to take seriously the relative significance of the slave-based sugar economies of the Caribbean in the process of primitive (original) accumulation that Marx attributed primarily to the enclosure movement in England.¹ Perhaps even more remarkable, the lack of debate about the significance of the probable trans-Atlantic voyages from the Kingdom of Mali in the fourteenth century to the coastal regions of Mesoamerica.

Returning to the present, however, discussions about VB and the many other similar traditional visions of the “good society” lead me to insist on the relevance of scale and the process of social change that we are or should be discussing. There are hundreds of millions of people who suffered the horrors of exclusion or, even worse, subjugated inclusion as colonialism and capitalism expanded around the globe. Yet, quite miraculously, many have jealously guarded their heritages and traditions, demonstrating a resilience that is now so apparent that we are obliged to recognize them as peoples capable of governing themselves and treasuring valuable knowledge and ways of living that are contributing to a better understanding of the planet as a dynamic system. The international community recognized their importance with the belated adoption of the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2004), following on the ILO’s Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Rights to Informed, Prior and Free Consent on development projects that might affect them or their territories (1991).

Those of us who have had the good fortune to learn more about these peoples and even be welcomed into their communities may understand the promises offered by their continuing search for a better way of living. They are constantly forced to accommodate the demands of the globalized society, but increasingly are setting limits on these concessions. The result is an increasing level of contention and even violence as the global market attempts to deprive them of their patrimony and

their heritage. Throughout the world, however, counter-movements are arising to brake this process, to support these people in their efforts to protect a way of life and pockets of the planet.

VB has become a slogan, a reflection of a familiar process of “commoditization” of everything. But it is also a reflection of the desperate search for new ways to organize life and community while also attending to the needs of the planet. As such, it should be understood as the Andean version of *Swaraj* (India), *Ubuntu* (South Africa), *Abya Yala* (Panama), and *Mandar Obedeciendo and Comunalidad* (Zapatistas and Zapotecos in Mexico), to mention just a few of the better known. These all encompass present-day versions of traditional cosmologies (cosmovisions) of peoples attempting to construct their own alternatives for self-governance to improve their quality of life while protecting their ecosystems. The [Indigenous and Community Conservation Areas Consortium](#) brings together more than 100 communities in 70 countries around the world whose members are committed to local variations of the principles mentioned in this discussion paper, reflecting the enormous variety of approaches to “Vivir Bien.” A different approach, built around the dual principles of food sovereignty and agroecology, is provided by the largest social organization in the world, [La Via Campesina](#), with more than 200 million members in more than 70 counties; its members are drawn from indigenous and peasant communities. It promotes local collective approaches to improving the quality of life by reinforcing traditional ties to the land, improving productive systems and directly attending the urgent need to improve diets and health in the communities.

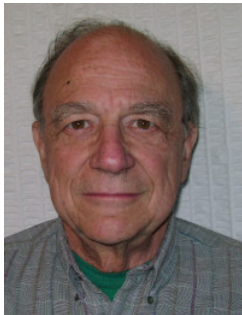
A key element in consolidating alternative strategies to implement these different visons is the important commitment not just to survive but also to consolidate new patterns of living. Throughout the world, peoples are asserting control over their territories, strengthening their ability to govern themselves, and developing ways of negotiating with “the powers that be,” taking advantage of a new recognition of their rights and abilities. These communities are moving beyond the tired calls for (representative) democracy, private property, and individual rights; they are forging a renewed form of participatory democracy and collective control of their communal patrimony. In place of promoting growth, many are moving towards “convivial societies” reminiscent of Ivan Illich’s seminal work *Tools for Conviviality*, committed to a new austerity or frugality to shape consumption, and indeed the quality of life itself, based on an understanding of their productive system and its relation to the ecosystem’s capacity to provide.²

The Great Transition to which we all aspire is already in construction in the thousands of the “post-capitalist societies” where people are learning how to live on the edges of the global marketplace.³ They are developing new ways of organizing themselves, recuperating valuable knowledge from their ancestors, and collaborating with willing associates to create a better quality of life and conserve the planet.

Endnotes

1. See, for example, Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin, 1985).
2. Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1973).
3. Barkin, David and Blanca Lemus, “Third World Alternatives for Building Post-Capitalist Worlds,” *Review of Radical Political Economics* 48, no. 4 (December 2016): 569–576.

About the Author



David Barkin is a professor at the Metropolitan University in Mexico City, where he has taught since 1975, and an emeritus member of the National Research Council and the Academy of Sciences in Mexico. He has taught in many countries, including the US, France, Spain, Cuba, and Chile, and has published 22 books and more than 200 referred articles in scientific journals. His research focuses on ecological economics, alternative paradigms for society, and the problems of indigenous societies, with whom he collaborates in creating designs for alternative futures. His work is oriented to having an impact on the daily lives of marginal peoples in Latin America and in changing the dominant paradigms in the academy.



Nnimmo Bassey

The pathway of the current global system has already hit a dead end. This system sees nature as a commodity or as an object that must be privatized and/or transformed and exploited solely for the benefit of humans. In this context, other beings can be dispensed with at will. Unfortunately, nature does not need humans in order to evolve and sustain itself. But humans need the gifts of nature to survive. Humans are indeed part of Nature and are unable to stand apart from her.

It is the understanding of the fact that humans are part of nature that humbled the ancients and also provided them with the wisdom to treat nature or Mother Earth with utmost respect. The search for viable alternatives and societal models, including for measuring progress, continues to yield poor results while a look back at the wisdom of the past seems to be the pathway to the future.

Pablo Solón's essay on *Vivir Bien* is an essential contribution to the search for an understanding of how this pathway can be delineated and understood. It traces the historical roots and divergences of the key Andean concepts that are driving current understandings and misunderstandings of the indigenous cosmovisions that promote living in harmony with nature. Solón recognizes the fact that building the future on the pathways of the past cannot be a romantic exercise because the historical footprints of *Vivir Bien* have certain negativities that must be resolved. Such negativities include the issues of patriarchy and related forms of social organization.

Living in harmony with nature and with one another is the controlling core of relationships in African communities and societies. It is the foundation of Ubuntu. Our humanity is all interconnected, and it is in community that we express our individuality. This is why ostracizing or expelling individuals from many African communities or societies constituted the worst form of punishment for any individual.

We learn in nature that diversity, not uniformity, is the basis of resilience. This is one reason why monocultures and food systems dependent on risky technologies and toxic soups are criminal. In unpacking the dynamic equilibrium in nature, Solón reminds us that these complexities cover the human, the non-human, the material, the spiritual, the cultural, and more.

As Solón notes, there is no single Vivir Bien, and the objective realities of peoples around the world help shape the meaning of well-being or living well. What needs to be forged is a complementarity of the variants of Vivir Bien on the platform of dignity and solidarity and as a continual struggle for decolonization of socioeconomic, political, ecological, cultural, and ideological systems.

Solón's describes Vivir Bien as an "incomplete and insufficient translation" of the traditional Andean ethos, whose meanings more closely approximate terms such "plentiful life," "sweet life," "harmonious life," "sublime life," "inclusive life," and "to know how to live." As much as I agree that it is an evolving and contested framework for reconceptualizing social relations, I would submit that this complex set of meanings contains the seeds for the construction of a universal understanding and application of Vivir Bien. Nevertheless, as much as the concept provides the platform for building harmonious human societies, we must acknowledge the fact that the pathway must be built in a way that does not negate the sovereignty of the peoples.

With the complexities involved in the understanding of Vivir Bien, it is easy to see how a superficial adoption of the concept can easily go awry. This could explain why the adoption and inclusion of the concept in the national constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador have not turned out as major planks for rebuilding societal relations between the peoples and between humans and nature. While the concept was a rallying cry for political and social mobilization, it remains statist, and its core economic direction remained extractivist and mercantilist and not as inclusive as had been promoted. Moreover, the concept of development has remained lineal, and its measure has stayed trapped in highly defective indices such as the often-cited Gross Domestic Products (GDP). As someone has said, things that are gross are hardly positive.

Pablo Solón's paper deserves to be studied by exponents of alternatives to development as well as future scenario builders. Well-being is best built from below and while the state can provide the scaffolds for its growth, it cannot be legislated. The great transitions will come with the popularization

and nodal interconnections driven from below and across borders and by peoples in various jurisdictions.

Having hit the dead end and knowing that the era of raw colonialism, slavery, and reckless exploitation is coming to a close, humanity must consciously rethink the way forward. There should be no shame if that pathway means humbly seeking out wisdom from indigenous communities.

About the Author



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Adrian Beling

The materialization of the GT as a global project (that is, the project of adding up a critical mass of enlightened individuals to reach a tipping point towards a GT) may remain ever-elusive. In a world that has become globalized in many respects, however, an epochal transition—albeit not a “designed,” “controlled,” homogeneous, or simultaneous one—is likely to be global, as well, or at least widely spread throughout the world. Pablo Solón’s thesis that *Vivir Bien* cannot be achieved by any given country in isolation thus seems warranted.

The war over alternative social-ecological futures can thus only be sensibly waged if not in a unified global front, then at least in a globally networked exchange of ideas, experiences. This implies, by extension, engaging diverse (contesting or complementary) socio-cognitive and cultural frames, colored by diverse experiences of the world. The complexity of this global world, which is particularly bewildering at this historical juncture, necessarily escapes any individual observer, no matter how attentive. Interconnectedness allows for swarm intelligence, which, in turn, seems crucial for understanding the larger systemic constraints to which smaller embedded systems are subject. Interconnectedness and the ensuing cross-pollination also help to blur identity/ideological markers. Such markers can lead to “the best proposal being dropped just because it happened to come from the wrong party.”¹

I am therefore persuaded that Pablo Solón hits the nail on the head when stressing the importance of fostering synergies/complementarities among diverse “transition discourses,” to use the phrase of Arturo Escobar, and initiatives around the world.² So far systemically constrained by locked-in extractivist matrices, the indigenous-inspired retro-progressive utopia of BV/ VB cannot be further advanced without the mutual engagement with (self-)critiques of Northern ways of life. Such critiques can be found both in the intellectual sphere and in a wide range of heterogeneous movements and initiatives (degrowth, time prosperity, work reduction, universal basic income, Transition Towns, digital commoners, etc.).³

Furthermore, the above initiatives show the role of civil society evolving from either a rule-challenging (protest and resistance) or a rule-taking force (service-provision) into a rule-making agent. This shaping power of communal and civic organizations vis-à-vis centralized design and implementation is also highlighted by Pablo Solón in his essay.

Regarding whether these networked transformative forces can gather the strength to bring about a large-scale transition, I tend to be skeptical. Yet the world is rapidly changing. In *Buying Time*, Wolfgang Streeck makes a persuasive case for the approaching exhaustion of capitalism, while Jeremy Rifkin predicts its “eclipse” in *The Zero Marginal Cost Society*, insofar the coming generation embraces the empowering potential of the Internet of Things (IoT) as the unfolding historical infrastructure revolution of our age for the build-up of decentralized modern subsistence or “prosumer” economies.⁴ The combination of the favorable backwind provided by these latter developments and the mutual energizing of systemic activist initiatives holds some promise, however little, of seeing a GT dawning in the coming decades, before current trends push modern civilizations down the abyss of barbarization and ecological dismay of which the Global Scenario Group and the GTI have been warning for decades now.

Endnotes

1. Hans Joachim Schellnhuber in a panel discussion with Katja Kipping at the Conference "Genug für Alle - sozial.öko.logisch" in January 2017, Essen, Germany, organized by the Rosa-Luxemburg Foundation and the Parliamentary Block of Die Linke: <http://www.nachhaltig-links.de/index.php/konferenz-2017-genug-fuer-alle/1812-schellnhuber-kipping>.

2. Together with Julien Vanhulst, Federico Demaria, Ana E. Carballo, Jérôme Pelenc, and Violeta Rabi, we put forward a concrete analysis of how to “make complementarities fertile” (Miriam Lang) among three iconic development-critical discourses in a recently published article in *Ecological Economics*: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0921800917303798>.

3. Consider, for example, the following: Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, “Crisis and Continuity of Capitalist Society-Nature Relationships: The Imperial Mode of Living and the Limits to Environmental Governance,” *Review of International Political Economy* 20, no. 4 (2013): 687–711; Stephan Lessenich, “The Externalization Society. Living beyond the Means of Others,” in *The Futures We Want Global Sociology and the Struggles for a Better World*, ed. Markus S. Schulz (Madrid: International Sociological Association, 2016).

4. Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, trans. Patrick Camiller and David Fernbach (New York: Verso, 2014); Jeremy Rifkin, *The Zero Cost Marginal Society: The Internet of Things, the Collaborative Commons, and the Eclipse of Capitalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

About the Author



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Ana Estefanía Carballo

I believe that this rich exchange on Pablo Solón's essay is a small example of what the VB discussions have roused in Latin America, that is, offering a framework to re-think and question some of the core assumptions that have dominated development thinking in the last century. Creating an interstice in the monolithic understanding of life offered in Western modernity, VB has contributed to revitalizing a necessary space for dialogue—a dialogue in which the multiplicity of lived experiences that offer other, interconnected interstices to this monolithic notion can be recognized.

While VB in and of itself has been subject to multiple cooptations (often of questionable transformative value), it has offered, in turn, a space to challenge, as Marisol De la Cadena would put it, “politics as usual.” It is precisely in the opportunity of incorporating the indigenous cosmologies, albeit it has done so in a very limited manner, that VB offers an opportunity to re-think our collective future. The dichotomous nature in which indigenous cosmologies have been historically placed against ideas of development or progress—the “civilization or barbarism” mantra deeply ingrained in the Modern colonial project in Latin America and across the world—is disrupted by the emergence and inclusion of VB discussions in the public sphere. In other words, the incorporation of the indigenous heritage into the policy and academic discussion of ideas of development where it had been historically rejected, precisely because of its indigenous nature, is in my view the strongest element that this discussion has highlighted for a GT.

The emergence of VB into current development discussions, despite the multiple cooptations, has brought with it the symbolic revitalization of a critical space to challenge some of the strongest pillars dominating Western development thinking. Despite the multiplicity of forms of cooptation and interpretation of the indigenous cosmologies, VB's boundaries highlight two core elements: the rejection of the idea of progress intrinsic to Western modernity and the idea of development; and

an ethical shift that highlights the intrinsic value attached to non-human elements within Nature as well as the acknowledgment of humanity's inclusion therein.

At the very least, these elements offer small beacons of hope and can contribute to the articulation of alternative paths. That said, we must heed cautionary notes about not falling into new forms of universalism, and instead want to recognize VB's potential to open a space for dialogue. VB's contribution—despite its multiple limitations—at providing a framework for discussion, a space for the symbolic encounter of alternative conceptions of the good life, should not be underestimated. Rather, nurturing its possibilities of engagement, with other alternative and sidelined cosmologies and ontological considerations, is where a synergic articulation of new ideas can offer the most promising opportunities for a GT.

About the Author



Ana Estefanía Carballo is a Teaching Fellow in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne. Her research focuses on Latin American development theory, indigenous epistemologies, environmental ethics, and social movements and environmental conflicts in Latin America, particularly those linked to resistance to extractivist practices. She is also a founding member of the Editorial Board of *Alternautas*, an academic blog that features Latin American critical thinking on development issues. She holds a PhD from the University of Westminster.



Eduardo Gudynas

I would like to start by acknowledging that Vivir Bien, or Buen Vivir, is an idea in the making, a collective endeavor, with different political actors presenting their own views on it. Solón's paper could be considered as part of those efforts, particularly in the context of some present-day debates in Bolivia.

It could be useful to depict something like a landscape of different approaches to Buen Vivir and examples of key ideas under consideration. The original or early understandings of Buen Vivir were a product of what one could call a "mixing" exercise. The core components of the idea started in Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador in the late 1990s; due to political conditions, that path was blocked in Peru, but continued in Ecuador and Bolivia at the time of the arrival of the new left-wing governments. In the case of Bolivia, it is quite clear that just a few individuals promoted the idea, while in Ecuador, it was more a collective effort.

In all these cases, Buen Vivir endorses a rejection of Western ideas of development and progress, and explores alternatives to development. In short, Buen Vivir was/is an effort to decouple from development and other core concepts of Modernity. It is true that Buen Vivir could be described as a harmonious relationship between "society" and "nature," but these categories are both understood in different ways than their mainstream definitions.

It is also true that Buen Vivir recovers traditional concepts and practices of some indigenous peoples—but not all of them. In that original effort, Buen Vivir was not presented as an attempt to return to an old past, to return to the Inca state or any idea of that sort. Buen Vivir, rather, is an exploration of alternative futures. While some indigenous components are included, others are not. Non-indigenous actors and ideas were also very important in the the development of Buen Vivir ideas (a clear example is former president of the Ecuadorian Constitutional Assembly, Alberto Acosta, who is not indigenous, and in fact is an economist trained in Germany).

This explains the relevance of “mixing” in the original Buen Vivir. Some Western ideas, particularly those related to critiques of Modernity, were included in Buen Vivir. The concept of Nature’s rights, in the sense of a recognition of intrinsic values in nonhuman beings, stemmed from Western environmental discourses, which were then “mixed” (articulated, fused, etc.) with the idea of Pachamama, an Andean indigenous traditional concept of human-nature assemblages. This resulted in the recognition of Nature’s rights in the new Ecuadorian Constitution (but not in the Bolivian one). Furthermore, the resulting legal framework was different in each country. In the new Ecuadorian constitution, Buen Vivir is complex: it gets a complete section with several articles, and is presented like a counterweight to development policies. In Bolivia, it is only a principle of ethical guidance.

There are not strict or direct links between Buen Vivir and indigenous individuals, groups, organizations, etc. Some of them endorse the idea; others reject it, considering it alien to their traditional thinking; and still others endorse development itself.

Buen Vivir is also plural. That means that Buen Vivir is more like an umbrella concept, and within it, there are more specific categories, as mentioned by Solón. But my point is the following: Bolivian Aymaras’ *suma qamaña* is different from Ecuadorian Kichwas’ *sumaq kawsay*, and these are, in turn, different from the deep ecology of some non-indigenous environmentalists. These three, plus some others in that region, all fall under the Buen Vivir umbrella. Differences and similarities require some further explanation and references to anthropological and ethnographic studies, which is not possible here.

Such differences make sense because each position is always rooted in its own specific ecological landscapes, with their histories. The Aymara version is adapted to its specific setting, and has, for example, a different understanding of community than the Amazonian version in Ecuador.

A clear problem arises: if Buen Vivir is plural, many different ideas and practices could use that label, and the concept became so vague that it ended up encompassing any version of welfare or a happy life in the outdoors. Nevertheless, there are clear boundaries between the Buen Vivir set in its original perspective, and non-Buen Vivir ideas. I will mention two examples (as I will return to them below).

(1) Buen Vivir does not endorse the modern ideas of progress and a universal history and, as a result, rejects Western development.

(2) Buen Vivir expresses an ethical shift, as it recognizes in different ways intrinsic values in the nonhuman; humans are no longer the only subjects that can have or produce value.

These and other stances resulted in heated debates over development, especially with regard to the role of natural resource exports and extractivism in the Andean countries. These debates were and are intensive, involving the participation of presidents, vice presidents, and ministers, and having a sizable influence on public opinion. Buen Vivir debates are not an academic exercise or an indigenous ritual, but a topic for primetime news.

As a result, governments, many academic institutions, and even indigenous groups rejected Buen Vivir in its original version to produce new ones that could be placed once again inside development and modernity (Solón addresses some of these problems). If those governments were to follow Buen Vivir, it would be impossible to continue with oil drilling in the Amazonia in Ecuador or the intensive mining in Bolivia. So, as they continue with those development strategies, they introduce new definitions Buen Vivir to make it compatible with or conducive to development.

A first wave of these battles was around the idea of *Pachamama*/Mother Earth rights, and explains the relevance of the ethical shift. The Evo Morales government introduced the idea of the rights of Mother Earth/*Pachamama* for the whole planet in the debates on climate change around 2010. This was done with a number of references to Buen Vivir and embedded within a radical critique of capitalism. But according to the original Buen Vivir perspective, the idea of planetary environmental rights makes no sense, because *Pachamama* is always local, and not planetary. *Pachamama* is rooted in communities/natures, in specific locations. While the Bolivian government claimed for *Pachamama* global rights, it continues its intensive natural resource exploitation with a number of social and environmental impacts. On one side, a strong anti-capitalist discourse, and on the other side, extractivism deeply connected to economic and financial globalization.

All this is linked with the debates about possible revolution or ruptures with capitalism at the local/national level, or by means of a planetary revolution or change—an issue that communists have been discussing for about a century, and which penetrates the development debates in the Andean countries. From the original Buen Vivir perspective, those changes are always local/regional, because the perspective is always rooted in specific landscapes/histories. And since it is non-essentialist, you

cannot produce a Buen Vivir blueprint to be used, let's say, in Asia. Furthermore, instead of one Great Transition, there will be a large number of regional/local ones.

A second wave sought to redefine Buen Vivir by placing it "inside" development (as progress, as economic growth). But the governments, scholars, social activists, etc., recognized that conventional ideas of development were not suitable, so they produced new varieties, such as a "socialist" Buen Vivir in Ecuador or "integral development" in Bolivia. These new Buen Vivir reformulations are fitted inside progress or development and defend consumption and welfare as indicators of the good life. A number of non-South American scholars played a major role in this second wave in Ecuador and Bolivia, with key backing from these governments. Stating that the original Buen Vivir was coopted by governments is not good enough; it is not that simple. It involves deep cultural beliefs and pre-political attachments to progress in a variety of actors.

These debates include specific disputes with different theoretical settings. Perhaps one of the most visible is with Marxists, as the original version of Buen Vivir shares their critique of capitalism. But that original Buen Vivir is also an alternative to socialisms. Again, Buen Vivir in the original sense expresses alternatives that are at the same time postcapitalist and postsocialist. This is also relevant for GTI debates: Is a transition possible without a corresponding ethical shift? And the meaning of ethics here refers to which/what have value, who/what recognize those values, etc. (and should not be confused with moral standings on right/wrong).

The socialist approach, even a traditional ecosocialist one, is restricted to the realm of human subjects, and does not endorse the idea of nonhuman intrinsic values or subjects. A heated debate is underway on these issues in South America. Within GTI, this opens the question of whether a transition entails only a move from capitalism to some sort of noncapitalist and good socialist option, or whether the alternative must operate on a deeper level to move beyond Modernity itself.

The multiple transformations, transitions, or revolutions promoted by the original version of Buen Vivir, included other subjects that are nonhuman, reclaiming new definitions of modern core concepts such as justice or citizenship. A number of analyses of these issues are underway in South America, with intensity and passion.

About the Author



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Holly Hanson

Pablo Solón's essay and this provocative discussion have made me think about the kinds of social structures that allowed people in the pre-Iberian past to express the values which have been called *Vivir Bien*. Solón referred to "systems of knowledge, practice, and organization": those systems were complex, and they succeeded in organizing large numbers of people across vast distances in what Nancy Farriss described as "the collective enterprise of survival."¹ Two elements of those systems seem particularly relevant as we think about facilitating a great transition now. First, in contrast to bureaucratic forms that characterize the modern world, Andean and Mesoamerican societies located political and economic agency in small units at the absolute base of society. They followed heterarchical as well as hierarchical principles. Second, those diverse, overlapping groups drew themselves together through religious practices that asserted mutual obligations of people for each other. Part of what made those thousands of small units different from the forms of social organization we know in the modern world is that they held and used the power to make decisions for themselves. They also differed from modern experience in that people genuinely believed that the well-being of the part was always best served by the well-being of the whole. The dynamic, far-reaching patterns of exchange they created expressed that conviction. I wonder how these two aspects of what Andeans achieved relate to each other: Is it possible that human societies can only create vital, functioning reciprocity when our social structures devolve decision-making to groups that are much smaller than our current social structures allow? If that is true, perhaps we need to be looking not only at a heritage of Andean beliefs, but also at the structures that channeled autonomous actions of communities towards reciprocity and regional interdependence.

That, in turn, suggests questions for us: How does the human race in the twenty-first century arrive at a compelling, just, collective understanding of the primacy of the whole over the part? And what processes will facilitate the creation of structures which allow people to express that value?

Endnotes

1. Nancy Farriss, *Maya Society under Colonial Rule: The Collective Enterprise of Survival* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984) and Steve Stern, *Peru's Indian Peoples and the Challenge of Spanish Conquest, Huamanga to 1640* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994) are two classic explorations of this topic.

About the Author



Holly Hanson is a professor of history at Mount Holyoke College, where she teaches courses on African history, the history of global inequality, and the comparative global history of small-scale agriculture. Her research, focused primarily on Uganda, explores how dynamic patterns of exchange have been created, and then undermined, and what history suggests about how they might be rebuilt. She is currently working on two books, one on the role of community-level redistributive structures in the creation of the modern world economy and the other on consensus-building and democracy in Uganda. She is the author of *A Path of Justice: Building Communities with the Power to Shape the World*, *Landed Obligation: the Practice of Power in Buganda*, *Social and Economic Development: A Baha'i Approach*, and numerous essays. She holds a PhD from the University of Florida.



Aaron Karp

Pablo Solón discusses Vivir Bien (VB) as an alternative to neoliberalism. In his essay, he discusses the ideal of VB, VB as implemented in Bolivia after it was written into the country's constitution, and the way that VB interacts with and complements other worldviews aimed at social liberation. Throughout the essay, several ideas about social change arise that provide an opportunity for deeper reflection.

One central theme is the idea of development. Solón describes VB as a worldview that “questions the very essence of the notion of ‘development,’ of always advancing toward a higher point, always searching to do better,” and calls this idea “a fiction.” VB’s belief in the cyclical nature of time and reality suggests that there is no meaningful way to define development in any form, but Solón’s beliefs expressed throughout the essay instead point towards a redefinition of the term. He notes that VB “is not merely a version of development that is less anthropocentric and more democratic, holistic, or humanizing, for VB does not embrace the conventional Western equation of development with progress and permanent growth.” I believe Solón is expressing that VB doesn’t just seek a more democratically led and egalitarian drive for material accumulation, a view I certainly share, but I tend to think of the pursuit of a “more democratic, holistic, or humanizing” society as part of a new definition of “development.” Solón himself speaks in the essay of developing “real democracy” and a unified vision with “holistic answers” to the issues we face, entailing efforts like expanding renewable energy and agroecology—views that suggest to me a redefinition of development. This is important because if humans are striving beings by nature, then asserting a new, meaningful view of progress would seem important to animating a mass movement (rather than removing the idea of development altogether).

Arguing against the idea of development in any form ensures that society’s elites will continue to define it. Our striving can be diverse; it doesn’t have to be primarily material—in fact, defining

progress as material accumulation quickly becomes hollow. But pursuing the right things—knowledge of the world, knowledge of one’s self, understanding of others, justice, inclusivity, a mindset emphasizing appreciation rather than accumulation—I think these can form the foundation of “development” in the society we’re aiming to achieve. In general, I believe that social transformation consists of a redefinition of important cultural ideas rather than throwing them out, which cedes control of the definition of reality to those in power.

Solón also discusses VB’s emphasis on decolonization, which is a multi-layer process of liberation that isn’t content with democratizing formal political institutions (like gaining the right to vote).

Domination is also exerted in the economic realm and even more deeply over our culture and our minds. Solón notes that VB pays explicit attention to ordinary people’s worldview and how it has been shaped by existing social structures to replicate the status quo. This worldview could include internalized ideas about the inferiority of the population and the superiority of those in positions of power, or the belief that the present society is natural or inevitable. I believe the most fundamental layer of liberation is the one we cannot see—it is how we think about the world and our place in it. Our worldview, which is typically implicit, is what maintains the more visible, oppressive economic and political institutions in society as legitimate.

The emphasis on decolonization is premised by a vitally necessary question: How free are we really? Such a question is revolutionary because it encourages us to rethink assumptions that would lead us to think and act like passive spectators in society, never seeing ourselves as the rightful decision-makers. Decolonizing one’s worldview also involves a rejection of the view of oneself primarily as a “consumer.” Redefining what a “good life” consists of and how much energy and resource consumption is enough for that life will play a primary role in determining societies’ demands on the environment. The call for decolonization highlights the need for a critically thinking, reflective mass movement.

Authenticity is also an important part of the discussion around development and decolonization. We are inevitably products of our societies, including concerted efforts made by elites to shape us into passive spectators, as culture and social institutions interact with human nature. But to the extent that we learn about the currents of influence that shape our view of ourselves, of the world, and of what

constitutes a meaningful life and a just society, we can more consciously choose how to live. We can start to “see with our own eyes, think our own thoughts, and dream our own dreams.”

The ecological issues we face can only be addressed through collective action, through individuals working together to create a new society. Solón also briefly mentions VB’s view of the connection between the individual and the community. It can be easy to forget one or the other in trying to effect a Great Transition, but balancing these is vital to the success of a movement. Being part of a movement is about working towards something larger than oneself—a just community. But the individual and their unique character and value cannot get lost through overemphasis on the community. Ultimately, only a just community is capable of imposing the limits on itself that allow for the preservation of the natural world. Without the individual there is no community, and without the community, there will be no free, living individual. As Solón observes, the quest for a society constructed harmoniously between individuals, the community, and nature is an ongoing process.

After explaining the ideals behind VB, Solón goes on to describe how the government of Bolivia has fallen short of implementing VB in practice. The government continues to extract the country’s resources with little apparent attention to VB. In this discussion, what seems to be missing is how VB gained recognition by the government in the first place. I would imagine the industries that have been converting Bolivian resources into profits for years had no interest in seeing an indigenous president elected nor VB written into the country’s constitution. Solón writes that “for the first time, after centuries of exclusion, indigenous peoples’ vision was recognized and incorporated as a core element in the [nation’s] political agenda.” This would seem to be an important step towards democracy. What was the popular force behind these developments, and where did it go? This is vital context, because the picture presented by Solón shows that even with these achievements, which must have been the result of long periods of social struggle, a movement must persist to ensure accountability. The state, surrounded by competing power systems and staffed by some with outdated worldviews, will not pursue elements of VB without sustained efforts to hold it accountable. Where in the story is the people’s movement?

When describing how the government has failed to follow VB, Solón notes that “what matters most is whether urban and rural communities, social movements and social organizations, are getting

stronger; becoming more self-organized, creative, and resilient; embracing greater solidarity; practicing complementarity; and contributing to the restoration of nature. On these criteria, Bolivia has lagged.” However, these developments could only ever originate within popular movements. Later, after the public has achieved sufficient control over its political system, then government could be used to advance this process. The mistake is thinking that government alone will produce these effects.

Solón writes that “institutionalizing and formalizing a cosmovision inevitably leads to its dismemberment,” but we must guard against the idea that giving structure to our ideals necessarily leads to hierarchy and eventual corruption. It seems to me that continued corporate influence, the extractivist values held by government officials, and the lack of a powerful, independent movement capable of forcing government accountability could be major factors in the “dismemberment” of VB. In other words, the corruption of this ideal is perhaps more related to the imperfect conditions surrounding it than the attempt to give it structure. It can be painful to see a beloved ideal become corrupted in trying to put it into practice, to know that others are receiving a false picture of it. In my view, the point of a far-reaching social movement is to embed fundamentally different values within our social institutions—replacing authoritarianism with democracy, replacing the economic goal of profit maximization with the goal of meeting community needs while respecting ecological limits, replacing narrow self-interest with concern for others, etc. If we understand that even the most sincere attempts at implementation will likely never reach the ideal, then we should make clear that this is simply part of the struggle towards a just society and it should not deter us.

Solón does draw the correct conclusion from his observations, affirming that “the Bolivian experience over the last decade demonstrates that for VB, the goal of taking power should be to encourage emancipation and self-determination from below, questioning and subverting the colonial structures that persist or arise even in the new ‘revolutionary’ state.” This is an important lesson about the nature of democracy: it seems to take persistent effort, first to gain public control of the state and then to continue that same autonomous mass movement to maintain accountability. That’s what it would take to really implement an ideal like VB. Democracy is not defined by state-led action, but movement-led action.

One major institutional transformation that must be achieved by a population in control of its

government is the democratization of its monetary system (and the removal of control from private banks). In this scenario, communities would come together to determine their needs and the currency required to meet them, and would drive the injection of new money into the economy by providing their budget to a democratically accountable and transparent central bank. This appears to be one fundamental way that democracy and sustainability are intertwined. As Mary Mellor has pointed out, enough money could be created to employ the entire working population and prioritize occupations that vastly reduce resource extraction (such as education and care for others), preserving nature while ensuring the public is sufficiently provisioned. If the government is forced to harvest the country's resources to generate revenue, then it is not monetarily sovereign. Even the most authentic government won't be fully in control of its policies without democratically directed money creation.

Solón concludes with a discussion of how VB complements other visions of social liberation. He writes insightfully about how these various systemic alternatives “point toward the same broad objectives.” Highlighting this alignment is essential for many reasons. First, it prevents divisions. Showing how other systemic alternatives are indeed complementary is important because liberation movements can get bogged down in semantics and perceived differences that may be trivial or may not even exist. The more we explicitly discuss the principles that underlie various visions for liberation, the more we will see their natural alignment. This would seem to protect against divisiveness, which elites rely on to maintain control of society: “Although not easy, nurturing a bold, synergistic approach is the only way to overcome the mistakes of fragmentation and the forces of cooptation in advancing a Great Transition.”

Solón's discussion of alignment also emphasizes the need for collaborative action. As activists working on various issues, we have yet to take seriously enough the idea that transformation may only be achievable by working together. Granted, it takes serious, sustained work to develop and maintain an ongoing multi-issue movement. People must believe that it is necessary. There must be greater efforts made towards connecting currently uncoordinated movements and visions for change.

Lastly, recognizing complementarity can lead to a vision that is broad enough to create a transformation of society, rather than just partial reforms. Not only do we recognize the need to work with others, but we also make this possible by combining various critiques of the existing society and broadening our concerns. I believe that our principles form the foundation of our movement, and the

more broadly these principles are applied the more internally consistent, compelling to both current members and prospective participants, and powerful the movement becomes.

Creating a broadly democratic society is a serious challenge. Bolivia's example shows that even electing an indigenous president and enshrining VB in its constitution, as much struggle as it took, isn't enough. Movements must persist until existing institutions have been transformed (or new ones created) to distribute decision-making power much more equally. Even then, the continued organization of the public outside of these institutions as a safeguard of accountability and transparency may be necessary. Solón describes this well: "The best way to avoid being captured by the logic of power is to empower autonomous counter-powers, not as passive state clients, but as entities truly capable of counterbalancing the conservative and reactionary forces that remain, as well as those that develop within the new structures of power. Above all, the vitality of the transformation process depends on encouraging the idea and practice of the commons throughout society and between society and nature."

Indeed, our ability to create sustainable societies will be determined by how far we spread the ethos of democracy. Individuals must transform from passive spectators to active participants in the shaping of society, and to help others become aware of our right and responsibility to self-govern. It means breaking out of the narrow social role we've been taught to play, in an ongoing process of decolonization. It calls us to connect and distill the information and ideas that help us understand the world—such as those that appear in this forum—and bring them to the public. Sufficiently active and enlightened, we can choose a different path. "Ultimately," Solón writes, "the key to social transformation lies with the capacity of commoners to build a different modernity with balance, moderation, and simplicity at its center."

About the Author



Aaron Karp is an activist writing a book about why our ecological crises demand economic and cultural transformation and how the climate movement can lay the groundwork for these changes. He writes at freedomssurvival.org.



Helena Norberg-Hodge

Many thanks to Pablo Solón for his insightful essay on this important alternative to the catastrophic juggernaut of industrial modernity. Having spent so much of my life interacting and working with a land-based, indigenous society in a mountainous region very distant from the Andes—Ladakh, in the Trans-Himalaya—I was struck by how the philosophy of *Vivir Bien*, or *Buen Vivir* as it is also known (coexistence, interdependence, relational ontology, cyclical versus linear time, etc.), and its principles of social organization (cooperation, reciprocity, respect) correspond to those in traditional Ladakhi culture. Pablo’s lovely and evocative image of the Pacha as “the cosmos in a permanent state of becoming” sounds like an ancient Buddhist sutra.

It is tempting to think that this correspondence of beliefs and practices is somehow related to geography—both arose in rugged mountainous regions where ecological constraints would favor sensitive and respectful practices and beliefs. But the core of both belief systems is closer to the rule than the exception among traditional cultures that—despite five centuries of conquest, colonialism, development, and now globalization—have remained close to the land. While certainly agreeing with the cautions made by Solón against a one-size-fits-all *Buen Vivir* blueprint, I would argue that many of the elements of the philosophy—the importance of genuine community, connection to other people and to the rest of nature, and an ecocentric ethic that guides all action—are indeed universally applicable.

I do find it interesting (and possibly a bit contradictory) that after explaining *Buen Vivir*’s cyclical rather than linear notion of time, Solón emphasizes that *Buen Vivir* is forward-looking and future-oriented, not a “utopian regression to an idealized past.” This is fair enough, but in my experience, this hastening to avoid accusations of romanticism is a pressure imposed on us by the very system of “progress” we are critiquing. It is the urban consumer culture that is romanticized throughout the western media and advertising.

Pablo Solón's observations on colonialisms old and new are excellent. I have witnessed the same phenomenon of psychological colonization all over the world, including very painfully in Ladakh. The "pressure to modernize" as I have called it, is everywhere turning people against their own cultures by painting the modern world as infinitely superior, while effectively portraying traditional practices as backward and stupid. The corporate media and its main vehicles—TV and internet—are particularly effective agents in the homogenization of cultures, as is Western-style schooling. These have helped multinational corporations penetrate the remotest recesses of the Himalayas and the Andes—and everywhere in between—enabling them to insinuate their harmful products into cultures, bodies, and landscapes. Coca-Cola is used in sacred agricultural ceremonies in the Andean altiplano just as it is displacing homemade chang and butter tea in Ladakhi homes.

As Solón points out, the systems behind these changes are mutually reinforcing: when the global economy arrived in Ladakh, it brought not only the media and consumerist advertising, but also Western-style schooling that separated Ladakhi children from the knowledge on which their culture was based; it brought subsidized food that made local agriculture seem "uneconomic"; it brought Western tourists whose seemingly infinite wealth made local people feel poor by comparison; and it replaced cooperation with competition as the primary mode of human interaction. Our work in Ladakh to counter these changes did not involve trying to wall off Ladakh from the rest of world, but bringing more complete information about what modernity and "development" really mean. So much of the psychological damage was the product of idealized—in fact, "romanticized"—images of modern life. So we organized reality tours to the West for community leaders, to show them many of the environmental, social, and economic problems that Westerners know all too well. I called this work "counter-development," and in essence, it is the same as the "decolonization" work Solón describes. But perhaps most importantly, we also connected Ladakhis with grassroots groups from the organic agriculture, renewable energy, ecovillage and permaculture movements. These exchanges raised esteem for land and community-based ways of living, and demonstrated how the Ladakhis' genuine prosperity was valued by many Westerners.

I agree that the signal challenge for a Buen Vivir transition is the decolonization and liberation of our minds, souls and beings—that we need to "see with our own eyes, think our own thoughts, and dream our own dreams." But I also believe that this kind of psychological independence requires belonging to a community with a degree of economic independence—the kind of community-based self-reliance

that the global economy systematically destroys. This is why my organization focuses on economic localization as a systemic solution, not only in Ladakh, but worldwide. I am therefore glad that Solón pointed out that “the fundamental role of the state should be to empower and help coordinate local networks of production, exchange, credit, traditional knowledge, and innovation.” As things stand today, governments are doing the exact opposite by supporting and subsidizing global trade and high technology, which actively subvert those local networks.

As dependence on the global system grows, it will be increasingly difficult for Buen Vivir and similar ways of thinking to confront the incomprehensible power and reach of corporate media, screen culture, digital technologies, etc., which are systematically colonizing imaginations, especially of the young. Given the deep penetration of media, is it even possible anymore to “think our own thoughts”? This question will grow in relevance with succeeding generations of “tech natives” increasingly estranged from the natural world and genuine community. It also raises the issue of urbanization and the considerable challenges of enacting Buen Vivir in a hyper-urbanized world, where an affectionate and intimate relationship with nature is difficult if not impossible to achieve. It seems to me that a stance against the structural forces driving urbanization should also be a central part of Buen Vivir—which is not to say that its principles and practices shouldn’t be vigorously applied in existing urban areas to green them and increase their self-reliance.

Regarding the role of the state and of policy, Solón writes, “A more popular and decentralized democracy, the only way to identify and correct mistakes made as we build a new eco-society, is essential to VB.” Inspired by the way traditional village governance systems worked in Ladakh, my organization has been promoting such a vision in the name of localization. What ideas and proposals could help effect this radical decentralized democratization? Here is an opportunity for a fruitful dialogue between Buen Vivir advocates and localization, transition, and “new economy” movements that are working to build up and re-seize community ownership and democratic control of the economy. Solón also alludes to the need for this sort of cross-pollination and international solidarity of alternatives.

Relatedly, while I very much sympathize with the sentiment of “encouraging emancipation and self-determination from below,” to what degree is self-determination from below sufficiently able to confront and fend off the depredations of international capital? In other words, are entities of the scale

and power of states necessary to confront the power of corporations today? It is obviously complicated, since states today are the main enablers of transnational capital. In some parts of the world, however, people's movements are providing the hope that there is a way of transforming the state through civic involvement. And it seems to me that this is something we need to promote. We would need a certain degree of centralized state power to reign in the power of global monopolies. This however doesn't mean strengthening the power of nation-state vis-à-vis local communities. On the contrary, a simultaneous process of decentralization is entirely possible and very much needed.

About the Author



Helena Norberg-Hodge is a linguist, author, filmmaker, and pioneer of the new economy movement. She is the founder and director of Local Futures and the convenor of World Localization Day and the Planet Local Summit. She is author of *Ancient Futures* and *Local is Our Future* and producer of *Planet Local* and the award-winning documentary *The Economics of Happiness*. She is the founder of the International Alliance for Localisation and a co-founder of both the International Forum on Globalization and the Global Ecovillage Network. She is a recipient of the Alternative Nobel prize, the Arthur Morgan Award, and the Goi Peace Prize.



Neera Singh

Following up on Holly Hanson's suggestion, I would like to draw attention to the need to think about the conditions that support *Vivir Bien* (also known as *Buen Vivir*) or other similar indigenous cosmovisions/world-making practices.

Many commentators have pointed to the similarities and resonance between the philosophy and practices of *Buen Vivir* and that of other indigenous cultures around the world. It is important to reflect on the conditions that enable emergence of these beliefs and ways of being in the world. Anthropologist Tim Ingold offers some answers when he says that indigenous cultures are not united in their beliefs (about animism, seeing the world as alive and interdependence) but in their condition of being in the world. The sense of connectedness to the world, seeing the world as alive and a culture of gratitude towards the more-than-human world, emerges from their day-to-day interactions with the world and of practices of dwelling in it.

Understanding the conditions that support beliefs/practices of *Buen Vivir*, or other Indigenous cosmovisions/practices, is central to the project of countering the appeal of the capitalist world.

It does appear that we are facing a losing battle. The affective appeal of "the world of stuff" is strong and is creating a different humanity with a dramatically different vision of the world than offered by *Buen Vivir*. While the bubbling of alternatives around the world is encouraging, I also believe that the task of alternate world-making, or creating space for a pluriversal world, is enormous. We have to step up connections between movements as Pablo Solón suggests and create pressure on nation-states to support transformation of the world that we live in. We have to radically alter the world that we encounter on a day-to-day basis to give alternate values and ways of being a chance to flourish.

The relational concept of becoming is also at work in the capitalist world—where our cars, computers, and phones, among other things—are entangled in our becoming. If we have to change our ways of being human, we need to pay attention to the world that shapes us and make efforts on a massive scale to create openings for alternate ways of becoming (through interaction with the “natural” world/ openness to the wonders to more-than-human world, and not simply of human created stuff). Creating connections between grassroots alternatives and movements is important—but it is critical that these movements step up pressure on nation-states to put in resources to support conditions for alternate ways of being to emerge (and we have to show how it makes economic sense to invest in such transitions). Demands for degrowth and basic incomes are a critical part of such alternatives.

About the Author



Neera Singh is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Geography and Program in Planning, University of Toronto, Canada. Her research interests include democratization of forest governance, conservation and development, and the affective dimensions of people’s relations with forests. She uses interdisciplinary approaches to understand the dynamics of social-nature relations, local visions of conservation and development, and alternatives to market-based approaches to conservation. Prior to her current academic position, she worked for over a decade as a practitioner with issues of forest conservation and sustainable livelihoods in Odisha, India. She founded Vasundhara, a non-profit organization based in Bhubaneswar and provided leadership to Vasundhara in its formative years from 1991 to 2001.



Author's Response



Response to Comments

I want to thank everyone for your valuable comments, reflections, and contributions. Rather than try to make a synthesis of this rich discussion, I would like to share some reflections, from my experience, that may help to answer some of the concerns raised and to deepen the debate.

There is no single vision of Vivir Bien/Buen Vivir. There never was. Not even in its origins. The construction of the concept of Vivir Bien could not escape conceptual mediations that used Western terms like “good,” “alternative to development,” “nature,” and many others. If the conceptualization of this cosmovision had been expressed predominantly in Aymara and Quechua, the result would have been richer, more complex (sometimes unintelligible for our knowledge patterns), and more diverse, because even among Aymara communities in different regions, there are different emphases that have to do with each particular history and environment.

Approaches kindred to Buen Vivir have germinated with different names among different indigenous peoples of the planet. Together, they constitute an important source for the construction of systemic alternatives. They are not the only ones, nor the most important, but they are unavoidable and very relevant for the Great Transitions that we are seeking.

I have highlighted some aspects of these “Buen Vivires” that, from my point of view, are central to the construction of systemic alternatives: Pacha, dynamic equilibrium, coexistence in multipolarity, complementarity, and decolonization. I have also mentioned some of the weaknesses and gaps of Vivir Bien in relation to patriarchy, the state, productivism, capitalist globalization, and other issues relevant to a Great Transition.

The key is to build complementarities between different visions such as degrowth, commons, ecofeminism, ecosocialism, localism, food sovereignty, Vivir Bien, and many others. System change requires overcoming capitalism, productivism, extractivism, patriarchy, xenophobia, plutocracy, and

anthropocentrism. Only the coexistence of different anti-systemic approaches can enable us to face this challenge.

Every process of change begins at the local level, based on direct experiences in concrete realities. As several of you have mentioned, there are thousands of local experiments across the world that are concrete, real, and living alternatives to the current system. These local experiments sooner or later have to deal with the unmerciful expansion of capitalism, extractivism, the state, and international conflicts. In their process of resistance and affirmation, they often flourish and expand, generating social movements of emancipation that go beyond their territories of origin. Sometimes, these movements broaden to embrace multiple social sectors, and become an electoral force able to compete for control of a country's government.

This is how the process of change began two decades ago in Bolivia. The attempt to privatize water sparked social movements with peasants and indigenous people taking a leading role. The triumph over the privatization of water in Cochabamba and the modification of the law governing drinking water in 2000 showed the people that it was possible to reverse other processes of privatization (e.g., of natural gas) and even recapture the State, the political power that for centuries had been in the hands of anti-indigenous elites linked to foreign capital.

The peasant and indigenous organizations that took the lead in this process built a political formation that seemed to offer an alternative to the traditional political parties. In this process, Vivir Bien gained attention and adherents as an alternative to the dominant neoliberalism as well. But the Vivir Bien of that time coexisted alongside an "industrialist" vision of the nationalization of gas and natural resources to diversify our economy.

Evo Morales's victory in the 2005 presidential election with 54% of the votes was a triumph of the convergence of social movements. Morales's accession to the presidency was a moment of euphoria and great hope. The government of which I was a part (and I do not regret being a part of it) had several successes and failures (for which I am entirely co-responsible) in its early years. These were difficult times. Between 2006 and 2008, Bolivia was on the verge of a civil war, and at various times, the national government lost control of different cities that were won by racist elites that mobilized crowds behind flags such as "departmental autonomy" (Bolivia has nine departments). In the end, these reactionary forces were defeated through referenda and popular mobilizations.

The Constitutional Assembly, which was developing a new constitution, that included the reference to Vivir Bien, was besieged for more than two years, and forced to meet in different cities. The final text of was negotiated with opposition forces protesting outside the Constitutional Assembly.

The enactment of the new constitution led to new presidential elections that saw Evo Morales get 64% of the votes and his party obtain more than two-thirds of the parliament. But at this moment, a government-sanctioned process of repression began that became evident with the police response to the indigenous march against the government's plan to build a road through the ecologically sensitive TIPNIS (Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro Secure). In 2014, Morales ran for and won another term, despite the fact that doing so was prohibited by the Bolivian constitution. And recently the Constitutional Court ruled that indefinite re-election is a human right that Evo Morales cannot be deprived of, clearing the way for him to run for a fourth term in 2019.

What happened to the social movements that drove this process of change? How did they allow the repression of indigenous peoples? Why didn't they react to the expansion of GMOs despite the fact that this has long been the position of the umbrella group Via Campesina of which the Bolivian peasant organizations are a part? What went wrong? Or what could we have done differently?

(a) We did not realize the degree to which the transformative power of the institutions and logic of state power would change us. In retrospect, the only alternative would have been to strengthen the autonomy of social organizations, not only to control us and become a counter-power, but also to enhance the capacity of self-management. Instead, we emptied the social organizations of their main leaders by making them authorities of different offices of the state, believing that this was the government of the People. We focused on the external enemy and not on the internal enemy that captured us from the logic of power. Some suggest that we don't have to engage with the State. In theory, that sounds very good, and hopefully, in the future when the Great Transition happens, it will be possible. But in Bolivia in 2006, renouncing state power was suicide, a betrayal of centuries of struggle. The mistake was not in taking control of the government but in not strengthening the counter-power of social organizations so that they became the real power. Needless to say, the vision of Vivir Bien was extremely weak on this point.

(b) We did not promote at that time a deep debate on the tensions between the Vivir Bien vision and

the dominant developmentalist and industrialist vision. As a result, we didn't translate the vision of Vivir Bien into concrete policies to challenge mainstream development predilections, but remained deferential to the growing dependence on extractivism because it generated resources for some social programs that built popular support to confront the right-wing conspiracy. During the first years, the situation was very difficult, but after approving the new constitution by referendum and winning the elections of 2009, it was absolutely possible to put fundamental guidelines of Vivir Bien into practice. However, instead of advancing in that direction, pragmatism and political calculation prevailed with the aim of neutralizing the right through a series of concessions to banks, agribusiness, mining, and even transnational corporations. Little by little, the government began to transform itself into its opposite, and Vivir Bien remained a mere rhetorical cover.

(c) We did not promote an alternative vision of modernity. Instead of advocating for a moderate, simple, and frugal society with roots in Vivir Bien, the indigenous president called on indigenous people to applaud and benefit from growth based on extractivism and consumerism. This has given rise to a new Aymara and Quechua bourgeoisie, and new strongholds of economic power linked to smuggling, mining cooperatives, and coca producers. Many leaders of social movements were captured by this dynamic of easy money, and several are now involved in corruption scandals. The problem is not only the government, but also the influence of these new sectors of economic and political power, and, above all, the demobilization of social movements.

Visions and alternatives are always linked to concrete realities. The generalization of a vision, a necessity as it interacts with other approaches, should not make us lose the sense of its roots, its context, its history.

The scale, the place, and the moment are very important. When we have a social process on a national scale, the international context becomes crucial. What happened and happens in Bolivia is part of a Latin American context in which capitalism has been feeding off chaos.

Bolivia is now in the midst of a complex process of recovery of indigenous, social, and citizen movements. These will lead to new social configurations that will not be the same as before, although they will retain some elements. It is a new process of articulation full of challenges and dangers. The government knows the social movements from inside and how to weaken them when they rebel.

Right-wing forces can gain traction by questioning the government's violation of the very constitution they previously sabotaged. The government's response is very simple: who is not with us is an ally of the right and imperialism.

After so much rhetoric about "change," the word loses its resonance. The keys to a resurgence of the spirit of Vivir Bien are actions and small achievements, leading to new victories, like the water war of 2000 that galvanized indigenous communities and social movement allies. Without small, relevant triumphs that translate systemic alternatives into concrete realities, it will be impossible to move towards a Great Transition.